

## Looking Back, Looking Ahead

**By Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin**

With 2009 coming to a close and a New Year ahead of us, we've made progress on a number of critical priorities for South Dakota, but work remains for 2010.

There's no doubt that getting the economy back on track has been the top priority of 2009. While we have a long way to go, no one can argue against the fact that we're in a better position now than we were one year ago. We've made progress, but unemployment is still too high, banks are not yet lending enough, and there's not enough growth overall in our economy. I feel cautiously optimistic that in 2010 we will see that growth.

We also made strides – but need to do much more – when it comes to addressing our country's dangerous fiscal situation. A major accomplishment of the year was House passage of tough new pay-as-you-go rules that require Congress to spend within its means. We're still working to get Senate approval, but we know that the President will sign the bill once it reaches his desk. Pay-as-you go rules were responsible for the budget surpluses of the 1990s, and they can bring us back in the right direction again. This has long been a priority of Blue Dog Coalition, and I was proud to lead that group as we pushed the bill through the House this year.

Also this year, I've been pleased with the tremendous progress we've made in fulfilling our nation's promise to its veterans, including providing access to top-notch health care. As the Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, the House has passed five of my bills related to veterans over the past year. In particular, I was pleased that my legislation, the Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act passed the House unanimously this summer. The Senate has also passed its version of this bill and I'm hopeful it will be signed by the President in 2010.

Additionally, I was honored to join President Obama this year as he signed landmark legislation that provides funding for VA health care accounts one year in advance to ensure timely and fair funding for veterans that is outside of yearly political fights. I was also proud to support a 10% increase in funding for veterans health care that will go into effect in 2010.

This year has also seen a renewed commitment from the Administration and the Congress to improving public safety and living conditions in Indian Country, after eight years of near neglect by the prior administration. In late October, Attorney General Holder endorsed my Tribal Law and Order Act of 2009 at a tribal listening session in St. Paul and a week later, President Obama endorsed the bill at the White House Tribal Nations Summit. Momentum is growing in Congress to not only address public safety, as demonstrated by recent hearings and legislative activity in both chambers, but to improve the woeful state of health care in Indian Country. As both public safety and health care are treaty obligations, the imperative to act is clear. I'm hopeful that the commitment from the Administration, along with a growing recognition from Congress of the need to address the dangerous and unacceptable conditions on reservations across the country and in South Dakota, we'll make substantive progress.

As the Congress continues to work through critical legislative priorities, I'm committed to finding

solutions that do right by South Dakota. Recently, I supported a bill to reform regulations of Wall Street and our financial system in response to the events of last fall that led to massive bailouts of financial firms and other companies, bailouts that I opposed. The House also passed major legislation related to energy and climate change and health care this year. While each of these bills include good provisions, and seek to address urgent issues, they are not the right mix of policy for South Dakota. Going forward, I will evaluate legislation related to these issues for their effect on my constituents – individuals, families and businesses in South Dakota, as well as their impact on the future we leave to our children. I remain optimistic that we will find a way forward on these critical issues.

At the top of my list for 2010 is a focus on spending and the deficit. I've been working with the administration and House and Senate leaders to push for a legislative package early next year that will include pay-as-you go rules and a fiscal commission to tackle some of the hard questions about entitlement spending.

While we've made great progress in many areas, everyone acknowledges that we've got a lot of unfinished business as well. With two wars, tens of thousands of troops serving overseas, an economy in recovery, and other priorities at home, our work is clearly not done. In the New Year, I'm looking forward to continuing my work on behalf of our great state to enact meaningful solutions to the challenges we face. I wish you and your family a happy and safe new year.